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ENGL 4910- Tutoring Practicum

The Curious Case of Dr. Writer and Mr. Verbalizer

Keywords: writer, verbalizer, writing pressures, writing fears, writing struggles

Abstract: The writer and verbalizer can cause major communication issues within a piece of writing. At the writing center, many students don't mean what they write; they mean what they verbally say. The writer tries to sound smart while the verbalizer tries to make sense. Many times, students will say "But I know what I want to say!" However, they simply cannot write it down. Communication between the writer and the verbalizer fails because of the attempt to sound smart, and the fear of the written word and its permanence. Freshmen struggle in learning an essay format different than what they learned in high school, and this freedom may be intimidating. However, with a writing tutor's acknowledgment of these issues, stress and fear can be relieved from students. This can be done through making the writer and verbalizer work together by reading the written word aloud, and even further, reminding the student they are not alone in the struggle.

Final Draft

The Curious Case of Dr. Writer and Mr. Verbalizer

The person writing this paper is not the same person writing this paper. In other words, the verbalizer and the speaker seem to be completely different minds when it comes to explaining ideas. An issue that arises within tutoring sessions is students don't mean what they write; they mean what they verbally say. When a student reads their own work, it may not necessarily make sense out loud. "But I know what I want to say!" they exclaim. However, what they have down on paper is not what they want to say. Once their eyes are off the paper and they must verbalize what they want to say, the ideas are clearer and more articulated. Why is this? We aren't ourselves when we write because first, we want to show off our knowledge, which can reveal a lack thereof. Second, fear: fear of not making sense to the reader, or fear of the permanent written word (Garlikov). Through knowledge and fear, the writer and the verbalizer become different people; the writer is struggling while the verbalizer is making sense.

This idea is conveyed in a short story by Jorge Luis Borges called "Borges and I." The narrator of the story is assumed to be one of the author's created characters or personas from another story. The speaker talks of living on the page by saying, "It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship; I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me. [...] Besides, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him" furthering the idea that within the writer or the verbalizer, there is another person (Borges). The story ends with "I do not know which of us has written this page" which begs the question, which of the two really writes our papers?

There are many different elements that stem from these different identities and thought processes, and one is the writing skills taught in high school. In many tutoring sessions with

freshmen, they explain that their first college paper feels so much more different than their high school papers. In high school, students are drilled on the proper formatting that an essay must have: an introduction, three body paragraphs supporting the introduction, and a conclusion that revisits the introduction. They learn this five-paragraph essay is the key to an effective essay they learn. However, the game changes in college when students have more freedom to format as they wish. With such freedom comes stress about what they have been told in the past and what they can do now. With freedom can come fear. Without understanding the more fluid writing process expected in college, student's writing suffers as they struggle with proper formatting.

Even more pressure is added to writing when considering who will be reading these papers: professors with PhDs in the field. This can be a very intimidating thought to any student, no matter their knowledge of the topic. Many students in sessions worry they aren't using a large enough vocabulary for their professors, that they will sound uneducated if they use basic words that they typically use. A thesaurus is a common source to find new words. However, many a time the 'more educated' word doesn't mean what they intend. This creates a meme-relatable situation in which Will Ferrill grins with the words "Sometimes I use big words I don't always fully understand in an effort to make myself sound more photosynthesis" (imgflip). Having misused words strays the student even more from the message they are trying to convey, and in Will Ferrill's case, a nonsensical message. Students feel the urge to use words they don't normally use in daily conversation, when in reality, their daily conversations are the information that make most sense to both themselves and the listener.

I was inspired to discuss this topic not only because I have noticed this difference in writing identity within my sessions, but I struggle with this as well. Being a different writer than I am verbalizer was brought to my attention in my literature analysis class by Dr. Brian

McCuskey. My first essay for this class was a four-page analyzation of a poem we discussed entirely in class. I had my ideas down solid and felt confident in my paper. However, I did not do as well as I had hoped and went to Dr. McCuskey's office for advice. He told me I could revise my paper and that it was "me and him against *that*" (*that* referring to my essay). Rather than turning to my paper, he had me talk through my ideas and I was amazed how much of my essay did not convey what I had wanted it to. It was from this study session that I gained skills I use in my own tutoring sessions today.

Because Dr. McCuskey inspired this realization, I recently asked him why he thought the reader is so different than the verbalizer. He said "I think that people forget that the important thing when writing is to make sense to another person, not to themselves. It takes a lot of time and energy to do so—and in college, it's hard to find enough of either." This is another aspect I had never considered. As writers, it is easy to get caught up in the idea that the point you are trying to prove is intended for another person. The writer accumulates knowledge on the essay topic through the research process, so it is easy for any topic to make sense when read by the writer. However, trying to get concrete ideas down on paper that are explained well enough for a reader that has little to no knowledge of what is being discussed is difficult. What may be even more difficult is the writer realizing this concept.

This is what makes being a writing tutor so important, as it our job to remind the student of these issues. In one of my sessions, a student brought in an assignment at the writing center about a time that communication failed him. In this case, it was a text message to his cousin gone wrong. He read his essay out loud--a great way for the speaker to catch the writer's mistakes. Throughout the entire paper he would pause mid-sentence and say "What was I thinking here? This doesn't make any sense." He kept catching his mistakes, shocked that he could have written

these unparalleled sentences with awkward wording. By the end of his essay he looked at me and said, “I now realize why my cousin took my message so wrong, I didn’t read it out loud” and he became very discouraged. I simply reminded him of the progress he has made within our 30-minute session and all the mistakes he had caught. I told him how the writer in me struggles all the time with making sense as well, and that it does for a lot of people.

Although there can be issues between the writer and verbalizer, there are ways to help ease the battle. Throughout my sessions, I have found reading a piece of writing out loud is a great way for the verbalizer to catch the writer’s mistakes. Stumbling through sentences or words means there is a problem, whether with diction, fluidity, or other issues. For writing tutors, it is important to be aware of the issues between the writer and verbalizer. In knowing this, the tutor can explain to the student how important it is for both identities to be on the same page, and that the point of the essay is to make sense to another person, not just to themselves. The relationship between the writer and verbalizer can feel similar to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; two completely different identities in one body. However, it is possible for them to work together through the awareness and acknowledgement of them both.

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